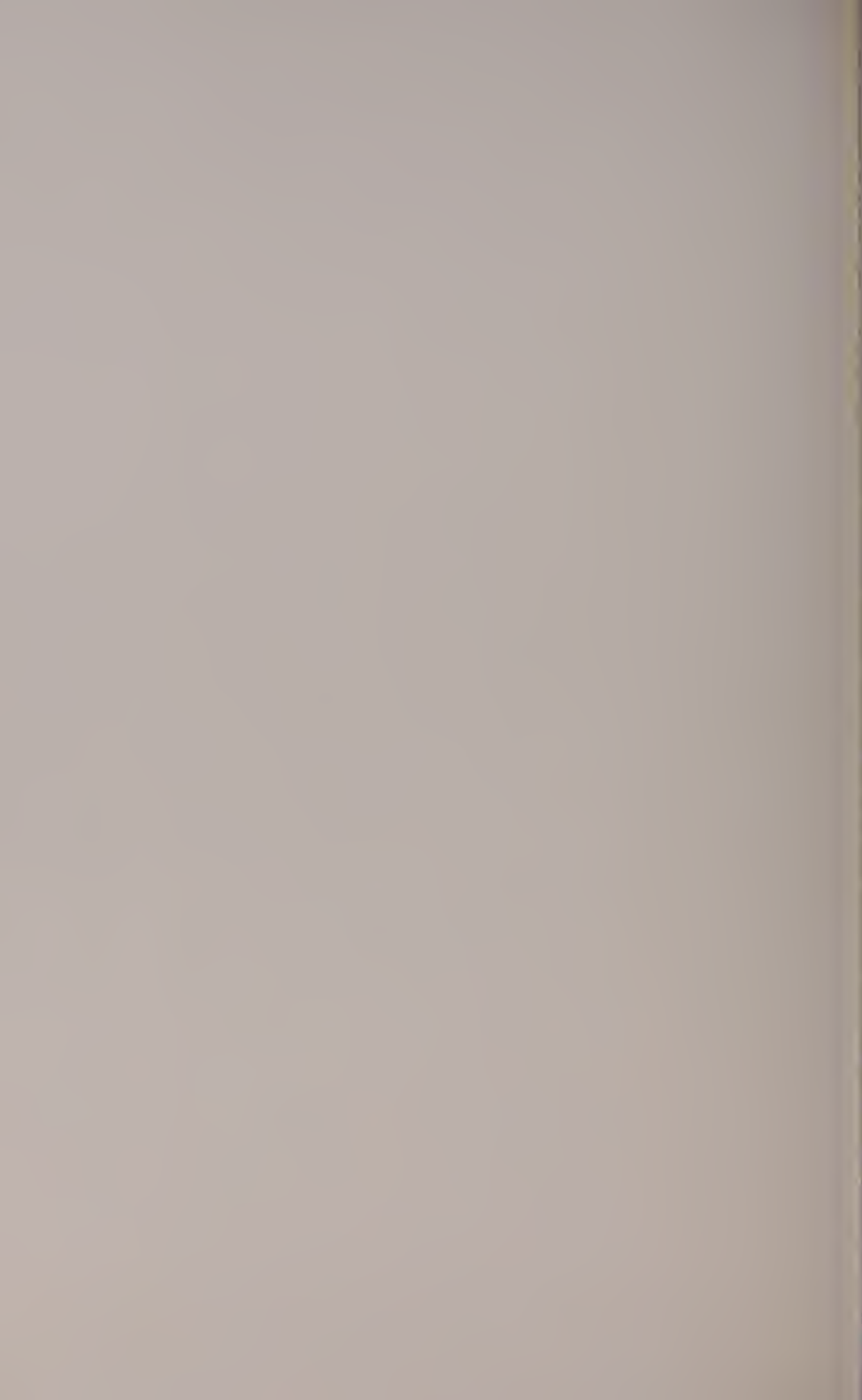


CALVERT





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Fall 1988

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Violin

For one moment, the car radio crackles static
like our old, tube-filled Philco
until the dial is turned
and the long, drawn note of the bow pulls back
against the strings. I remember trying.

The man at school suggested the flute or the clarinet,
something to do with the shape of my mouth,
but my mother insisted.

She was certain I was meant to play.
She said that I had leaned my head to the left

from two years on as if hearing some far-off music,
that I held the imagined instrument
with my left hand extended and used my right arm
to make the sweeping sign of the bow.
Every night I'd rosin the horse-hair over and over,

for the smell, for the golden color of the crystal,
more precious than the instrument itself.
I hoped to snap the hair from a horse's tail,
the hair cut from a woman's head.
I'd tune each string and begin,

lean my cheek to it, tensing the left shoulder.
The fingers of the right hand closed,
disconnected, almost naturally, from the black notes.
Every evening the sun set, I cried.
The empty case lay open on the bed, black leather

lined with lavender. It could have been a coffin
for a child, for my grandmother's firstborn, the one
who didn't see his first birthday, who choked on his own breath
while my grandmother warmed him at the castiron stove.
She held him tucked under her left cheek like a violin.

Years later she told me there was a photograph of him
in his casket as there was of her father in his.
She told me that the year my eldest uncle died.
She didn't understand why the family
wouldn't allow her to take his picture,

and I remember the pictures in a book of thirty-two children
who died over a four-day period from diptheria.
They were each in their own small coffin lined with white satin,
propped up like dolls in their boxes with their eyes closed,
waiting to be taken home by those who would love them.

In Which I Bore A Great Share

Today the air is damp and comes off on me
like someone else's sweat. The fields
smell of wild onions where the mower's been.
The heat makes us slow, and the haze
makes the world look like it's under water.
It was like this, the air, thick and damp
and full of smells the day we saw the pigeon houses.
The walkway that led to them was white,

chalky as gypsum, birdshit under every shoe.
Some were barefoot. I stepped on a baby bird
so soft it never made a sound.
Inside, the dark hid the living and the dead.
We went there to get the Sunday supper,
but first we petted the chicks, their eyes
bulged purple under veiny skin, their bodies
featherless and angular. The whole place pulsed

with cooing. So close, I hummed along.
The woman who would be my aunt gathered the birds.
They came to her. She stroked their gray throats
and broke their necks with one turn.
The thrumming of the birds throbbed in my ears.
Twelve people sat at the table. Heat from the kitchen
mingled with the heat, smells of onions, tomatoes,
potatoes. All I could see were small, gray bones

lining the plates. I ate bread crusts
and saved the centers. Later, out back at the privy,
I sickened and threw in the soft bread from my pockets.
The old people were singing old songs without music.
The children danced. The grandmother dressed in black
clapped her hands and clucked her tongue.
Tears formed, unborn, behind her eyes, like the unborn eggs
of the fresh-killed doves, seed pearls stored away inside, unused.

Photograph

Ruta Aidis



Rhythms in North Idaho

It's a newer place, less worn out, abrupt
square hills, and a sky with shoulders.
And here a different kind of cherry grows:
closer to the ground, forking-out wider,
and blooming into June and full high sun.
The sept of early dawns, already light
is reaching shyly from the east at four,

and I am brought awake by killdeer calls:
sharp dee-ees out of purple-blues: houndstongue,
sky-pilot, horsemint, and the roadside vetch.
One black phoebe darts, a grey and thin
complaint in the mountain hickory-pine,
high in the knurl-barked shaggy limbs,
where lake-winds start the movement, day.

The dancers were divided in two lines,
women right, men left in the moieties
of religious schools. Slow-slow-quick,
quick again with a little pause in between.
*Try to hold some tension, she said, it's like
a spring, a little pull and then kick out
your right foot and I'll come back.*

There is a grace in the formal the free
can never have. The land is too big:
here what matters is the dance, work itself,
the killdeer, the one-hundred notes in the song.

Guernica

On the way to the Retiro, we stopped at a park bench to read what the guidebook said about *Guernica*. I wanted to prepare myself for the experience or something like that. I've got the same hang-up with maps. I always figure there are these clues encoded into them, that if I study them long enough, I'll get a sort of foothold or headstart.

Every time we got to a new city, and we traveled rapidly that summer, I consulted the map and the book compulsively our first day there. It got to be a joke with us. Tony would ask, "Where does the book say we should eat?" or "Where are we on the map?" And I would look at the book or the map to answer him. Sometimes it irritated him, though, and I tried to explain. "I can't help it," I would say, "I have this need to place myself." I told him about the time I was eight and got lost at Humpty Dumpty Park. How I remember being lost, but I never remember anyone finding me. For years, I was convinced that some nice couple spotted me crying and took me home. I wondered why my real parents never came looking for me. Ever since then I've had the thing about needing to know where I am.

Today, Tony was in a good mood. He plunked down on the bench. Tony is compact. He plunks. "Read to me about *Guernica*," he said.

I cleared my throat. "*Guernica*," I read, "Picasso's most controversial painting, is housed in Madrid's Casa del Buen Retiro." I looked at him to see if I was pronouncing it right.

"Place of good retreat," he translated.

I continued, "Until 1981, the painting hung in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Picasso requested that it remain there until such time as Spain was declared a democracy. The painting's title derives from the name of a small town that was bombed by German planes during the Spanish Civil War. Upon being asked by officials if he had painted *Guernica*, Picasso responded, 'No, you did.' The painting is still extremely controversial today and the Retiro has had to install an extensive security system to protect it." I closed the book.

"That's it?" Tony asked.

"Yep," I said, "I guess they want you to go see it. They just try to pique your curiosity."

"And discourage you from vandalism," he added. We sat for a moment. I noticed Tony had on his pensive expression. His eyes were clear, pale blue like the color of a mint and sometimes, when he was thinking, they had a peculiar distance to them. It was the same expression he wore when he wrote. I had come to realize that when the remoteness was in his eyes, it meant he was storing something for a poem.

"What?" I poked him. "What are you thinking?"

"I was just thinking that I'd like to live in Spain sometime," he said. "This country is so amazing to me. To have lived under Franco for so long and only now to be allowed your own art or your own expression." He shook his head in wonderment. "It's like a country finding its identity."

"I never thought of it that way," I said. One of the things I loved most about Tony was the way he would say things like that, that I'd never thought of before. It was as though he had his own filtering system for the world.

He got up to go. "Well," he said, "I'm piqued."

I shoved the book back in the backpack and handed it to him as we began to walk. It was his turn to carry and besides, I was tired. We had spent the whole morning at the Prado, wandering through endless rooms of Spanish masters. We'd gone primarily to find Goya's "dark" paintings (an understatement if ever there was one). He painted them for his country house after he went deaf and they're quite macabre.

Within the Prado's labyrinthine lay-out, we had searched at length. Immense tour groups shuffled from room to room and avoiding them proved as challenging as finding the Goyas. Again and again, we circled through rooms of his earlier work. A few rooms held only his "cartoon" paintings, red-cheeked children grinning on every wall. There were portraits as well, and of course, the "Maja" paintings — "naked" and "robed." We finally found what we'd come for in the basement. Apparently, that's where they hang the more demonic works. Bosch is down there too. There were, at least, no tour groups downstairs. Inside the Goya room, hung a painting on the far wall called "Saturn Devouring One of his Children." It practically paralyzed me. A wild-eyed man holds this miniature body to his mouth, arm first. He has already eaten the other arm and the head. I studied it closely. His paintings upstairs were all so cheerful. I wanted to know what makes a person go so dark. I took out the book. "Goya appears to want to depict the anguish of a man who is losing his vital energies," it said. I put it away and stared again at the painting.

Tony moved up beside me. "These are amazing," he whispered. "I wonder why they keep them hidden away down here. They're more moving than anything upstairs, don't you think?" I nodded. "You know," he said, "with a lot of paintings I can appreciate their beauty or the craft, but with these, I really think I can see what Goya is trying to say."

I didn't say anything. I felt as people must when they witness a serious car accident. The paintings did move me, but the movement was purely a visceral one. It had nothing to do with artistic appreciation. Not that I doubted Tony, being a poet probably helped I decided. Maybe there was a sort of artist-to-artist understanding. In Amsterdam, he had said once that Van Gogh was a poet's painter. It really pissed me off then, but the truth is that after countless gallery visits, I still don't feel as though I have a good grasp on those wavy lines. I love Van Gogh, but I couldn't tell you why he painted everything ripply like that. I've even seen Arles through the window of a train and it did not strike me as a geometrically distinct place.

After a while longer, I let Tony take my hand and lead me out. Before we

left, I bought a print of the Goya. I had no intention of ever hanging it, but I wanted to have it anyway.

That was when we came to the park bench: after the Prado. And now, walking to the Retiro, I was tired. Before we left for Europe, I had bought a pair of walking shoes. They helped a bit. I looked down at them. Beige. I don't usually wear beige. I don't like beige. I had needed walking shoes, though. The only real summer shoes I had were a pair of black sandals with thick straps that dug into my feet. I'm not exactly what you'd call a sensible dresser and I'd had to buy some other things too — shorts, little white cotton socks. Moving around so much, you can only take a few things. They have to be sensible. I watched my feet moving toward the Retiro. Beige shoes and little white socks. I felt like an imposter. "Don't worry," I told myself, "those aren't really your feet." Even as I was saying it, I knew I was lying. Just looking at them was reminding me they hurt. To distract myself, for the rest of the walk I tried to picture the dresses and jackets hanging in my closet at home and the shoes, paired and dusty under my bed.

At the door of the Retiro, stood a security terminal like the ones in airports. I opened my purse to let the guard peer in. It probably would have bothered me to have him search my bag except that, for our trip, as I said, I had pared down. There was almost nothing in my purse. The only vaguely embarrassing thing was a tampon and it irritated me that I even thought of it that way.

Once inside, *Guernica* was virtually the only thing to look at. Massive, it monopolized an entire wall. I posted myself in front of it and stared like everyone else. I examined the greys and blacks and whites, the images of the horse and the bull and the two women wailing. There were pieces of bodies too, and I tried to place them together in my mind like a puzzle. The whole painting had a dismembered quality to it that I found disturbing. The horse seemed to have too many legs and the bull, too few. The eyes bothered me the most though. Picasso's eyes have always irritated me. One of them consistently drifts out of its socket and joins the other on the wrong side of the face. It just seems like too large a liberty to take. I mean, I understand artistic license and all, but when you start rearranging people that way, that's too extreme. If I had known Picasso, I decided, I wouldn't have let him paint my eyes like that.

After a while, I snuck a peek at the other people. They all stood stone silent, transfixed. A woman in the corner looked as though she might begin to cry. I felt irreverent. It was the same feeling I had as a child during Yom Kippur services. During the silent prayer I would always lift my head and watch everyone else. I looked back at the painting. I tried to will some sort of emotional reaction. Nothing doing.

Tony stood right in front of the painting for a long time. I noticed how loosely his clothes hung on him. We had both lost weight in Europe — too much walking and not enough eating. In our room, the night before, he had tried on my pants as a joke. They fit snugly, but I had to admit they were flattering. At the time it hadn't bothered me, but now, thinking about it, I was annoyed. My jeans were the one article of clothing I'd brought that I

wasn't totally sick of. Almost everything else had been purchased new for the trip and I had decided, after awhile, that I didn't really care for my new clothes. They all seemed like they belonged to someone else. And now I wouldn't be able to wear the jeans without thinking that, in a way, they belonged to Tony.

Watching him, I noticed he even looked Spanish with his dark hair and blue eyes. I was jealous. I stood out everywhere we went in Spain. At home, I like the fact that I'm fair. I dye my hair different colors of red to make my skin seem paler. Here, it only seemed odd to me. My roots had begun to grow in brown and the night before I had thought that maybe if my hair were shorter, it would be less vivid. And so, in our room, Tony had cut my hair, trimming it carefully in an angle over my ears and on the back of my neck. Afterwards, he brushed the small red pieces off of my neck and shoulders, his hands soft on my skin. "Look in the mirror," he had said. "You look like a different person." I did look different too, but my hair was no less red, and I wanted to cry then, standing there, staring at myself.

I stayed facing *Guernica* until Tony was ready to go. Outside, the heat curled around us like a cat. The air wouldn't begin to cool for another hour or so. Tony halted at the top of the stairs. "Can we stop here for a minute?" he asked. "I need to write in my book." We sat down on the flat stone steps with the other tourists. He extracted his book from the pack and began to write, describing *Guernica*, I suppose. I was just sitting, feeling my body change from the museum cool to heat. My skin tingled and I closed my eyes and tried to determine the edges of myself. I couldn't do it. I wanted to ask Tony if he could feel, without looking, where he stopped and the air started. He was still writing in his journal, though, so I didn't. Poets all carry these books with them. They're always writing things down and never letting you see it. After a while, you begin to edit yourself without even realizing it. You don't want anything really stupid you say to end up in a poem. One time, Tony wrote this poem about me asleep. The poem was a sort of love poem, really nice, but after that I had trouble sleeping for a week or two. I pictured him, awake, examining me for material.

To amuse myself, I decided to pretend I was a poet and observe people. Another couple sat to our left, both staring at their feet. I knew they were Americans. After a month in Europe, I could spot us. We radiate the aura of the misplaced, disproportionately young and always a bit dumbfounded. The man's hand absently toyed with the hair at the nape of the woman's neck. The four of us sat like that — Tony writing, and the couple, and me in the middle, waiting for someone to do something. I spotted a phone booth across the street. If I had known anyone in Madrid, I would have called.

Finally, the man turned to the woman. "It must have taken a lot of courage to paint that," he said.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "maybe he did it because he had to."

He frowned. "That's bullshit. Nobody does those things because they have to. That's just a semantic trick. It's what people who don't do things

say to make themselves feel better."

She stared at him. She didn't seem to be offended, only thinking about what he said. I had an urge to lean over to the man and tell him he was full of shit. He, obviously, had never dated a poet. "Artists can't help it," I felt like saying, "she's right. It's not something they do; it's a psychological condition. They can't help themselves." I restrained myself, though. I knew that he would only say I was trying to make myself feel better for not being an artist. Instead, I turned toward the couple and asked quietly, "If Picasso was so great, how come he always painted eyes in the wrong place?" Neither one of them answered. They didn't even look at me.

I turned back to Tony. I wanted to have a conversation. I wanted to know what he was writing. I was beginning to think that he was merely making up nonsense in his book, writing extended paragraphs of gibberish for the sake of appearing sensitive.

I tapped his shoulder. "Do you have the water?" He pulled the bottle out of the bag and held it out without looking up. I took a long drink and recapped it. "I'm hot," I said. "Spain is really hot." He closed his book, holding his place with his finger, and looked up at me. I knew I was irritating him, but it was like a compulsion. I couldn't stop myself. "I'm hungry too," I said. "Are you done yet?"

Tony let out his breath in a little gust. "What's wrong with you? Does it look like I'm done? If you're bored, why don't I meet you some place."

I had been afraid he would suggest that. I had no desire to wander the streets of Madrid, alone, radiating Americanness. I speak no Spanish and trying to order food or buy something, when I couldn't understand anyone, always left me feeling foolish. "Nothing's wrong," I said. I decided a guilt trip would perhaps be effective. "It's okay. I'll just sit here. You go ahead and write in your book." I put on a look of mock-entertainment.

Tony removed his finger and shoved the book back in the pack. He jerked his arm forward for the water bottle. "Want any more of this?" I shook my head. He took a swig and stuffed it into the bag and zipped it up. "Come on," he said standing up, "let's go." He began striding down the street. For a moment, I contemplated letting him go on alone. I wanted him to feel remorse. It occurred to me, though, that maybe he would just be relieved. I ran to catch up.

We walked like that for a while, saying nothing. Tony placed his feet down firmly with each step. I had to do time and a half to keep up. Taking those long strides, I comforted myself by imagining I could detect, very slightly, the curve of the Earth beneath my feet. "Our planet is too large," I thought. I knew if I could get some sense of the Earth's roundness, I would feel better. If only the horizon dropped off a bit at the edges or something.

Eventually, the heat slowed us and we fell into step beside each other. "Where do you want to go?" Tony asked, softening.

I knew he wanted me to pull out the map. He wanted to be able to laugh so it would be okay again. "I don't care," I said. "What do you want to do?"

His mouth tightened. He always hated it when I couldn't make up my mind about simple things like where to eat or what movie to see. Usually, I

forced myself to choose something. I didn't know why I couldn't seem to this time. I felt possessed.

We passed a bakery with a stand-up bar and he steered me through the door, his hand flat on my shoulder blade. We found a place at the end of the bar, away from the other people. Tony motioned someone over. "Dos cortados y dos palmeras chocolate, por favor." The man went away to get the pastries and coffee. I wanted to know Spanish. I wanted to be able to say something to him when he came back, to lean over the counter and introduce myself. I yearned to say my name aloud, slowly. I had not introduced myself to someone in so long. "I am Elizabeth," I would say, holding out my hand.

The man brought the order and I extracted a bill from my money belt and handed it to Tony. At the onset of the trip, I had great misgivings about keeping my money there. When you wear a money belt, it looks as though you are reaching down your pants whenever you have to pay for anything. It didn't matter anymore though. I felt invisible. No one was watching me. I looked down at the palmeras. They filled the plate, pretzel-shaped and coated in chocolate. I didn't really want a pastry, but I ate it anyway. I had to do something. Tony was chewing slowly and sipping coffee out of the tiny cup. He always waited until his thoughts were composed before beginning a serious conversation. The pastry stuck in my throat. It was cloyingly sweet. I tried to wash it down with some coffee. I felt twelve years old, knowing that my report card had come in the mail, waiting for my father to come home.

When he finished his pastry, Tony lit a cigarette and turned to me. "I need to know what's wrong," he said.

I searched my brain for an adequate answer. Nothing came to mind. All I knew was that everything he had done from *Guernica* on had irritated me. I felt guilty for bearing such malice toward him. "I don't know," I murmured, "I'm sorry. I really am. I don't know what's wrong with me." I forced myself to look him in the eye. I didn't know if I was trying to be manipulative or not. I thought about it, but I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't seem to locate myself.

He reached over and took my hand. "I'm not trying to start a fight," he said. "I'm a little angry, but I don't want to fight. I just want to understand what's going on with you." He was moving his hand over mine as he talked, tracing the outlines of my fingers with his.

"Don't be nice to me," I wanted to say, "yell at me. Say mean things." I felt dangerously near tears. "It's just the book," I began, "you were writing and writing. I don't know why it upset me so much." I looked at him, silently begging him to say something. He was quiet, waiting for me to explain. I looked on the counter for something to stall with. I had finished my coffee. I lit a cigarette, dropping the match on the floor. Ashtrays are scarce in Spain.

I started again, not knowing what I would say anymore. "It's like, remember the Matisse show, when we first started going out? You would stop in front of paintings and pull out a little notebook to write something

down. I remember you said you hoped it didn't bother me, you writing things down like that. And it didn't. It never used to bother me. You told me about your teacher who would write things down on scraps of paper. When it came time to write a poem, he would arrange them in front of him like a mosaic until they did something." I paused and took a drag from my cigarette. "The point is, there was that one painting there, at the Matisse, the one with the violin cases. I remember you stopped in front of that one for a long time. You were writing in your book. I kept looking at the painting, trying to figure what you were writing." I shook my head. My throat tightened. Tony was watching my face. I went on, "When you wrote that poem, your Matisse poem, you said they were like little coffins open on the bed." I could feel my eyes welling up. I blinked and tears leaked out of the corners. "I just never would have thought of that. They only looked like violin cases to me." I looked up at him. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He reached to wipe the tears off my cheeks. "Why are you doing this to yourself, Elizabeth?"

"It's just that I know," my words caught a moment, "I know no matter how long I looked, they would have always seemed like violin cases to me." I stopped. I wasn't making any sense at all. I didn't even know, any longer, if this was really what was bothering me. I didn't know if I wanted to be able to see things that way. "I don't know why I'm crying," I said. "I feel like those pieces of paper of your teacher's, like I'm trying to arrange myself into something that makes sense." I gazed around the bakery. No one seemed to have noticed. Spain is an emotional country. Perhaps people here often cry in bakeries, I thought. I knew I hadn't made myself clear, but I couldn't muster the energy to go on. I let myself cry.

Tony moved closer to me so that we were touching. It was then that I noticed the minty remoteness in his eyes. I could tell that he was thinking of the poem he would write about this. His hands were in my hair, smoothing the hair that he had cut, moving over my shoulders, translating me. We stood that way for a long time, the two of us pressed together, small at the end of the bar. And, standing like that, I realized there didn't have to be a poem in it. I was there and I was crying and it didn't have to mean anything more than that.

"Tony," I said, taking his hand, "I'm not going to read this next poem of yours."

He frowned. "What next poem?"

I ignored the question. "I read somewhere," I said, "that when Picasso was married, he did a portrait of this woman he was having an affair with, but he didn't want his wife to be suspicious so he called it 'still life.' And the way the painting looked, everyone just thought it was a still life until they got a divorce and he retitled it."

Tony was staring at me like I was crazy. "What are you talking about?" he said. "What poem?"

Bed

Laura Bellows



Self Portrait With Claudia



Go Go



It Is

I have no eyes, just washed-out sockets.
Salt water dries my cheeks to flakes.
Blue veins ache in my forehead.

No sleep drapes this hot bed, these sweaty sheets.
The thoughts parading past my eyes
Can fire me up all night, a pulse racing in my stomach.

Sex cures insomnia, but when I reach for you
I am in my own bed, alone
With brittle memories of how
I have been pulled from childhood,

Pushed into cold stirrups,
Invaded by steel sticks and doctors
Who say, *Move your hips down,*
And, *What's your major?*

My hands go white over the bed's edge,
Feeling all over the rough emptying.

It is a spider that I vacuum from its safe
Staircorner womb.

You Can Read My Walls For Hours

Black sheets eat my bed and suck my body toward sleep.
The blue concrete wall sweats against my face,
Bricks under my eyes as I slowly swing
Onto the carpet, my toes crunching on inground slivers

Of junk food that live in the low fibers and cut my foot.
This is the tape-shredded ceiling that insulates my cave.
I share my cubicle not by choice with another body that breathes my air.
And these are my posters, my torn-out pages,

Edges which flap a paper hello and untaped goodbye.
These bands advertised on my walls are gone, even "Peach of Immortality,"
But I saw them so I own them, even if they only sang
A moment before they shot into oblivion.

These photos of women in torture, in minis, self-starved for beauty —
They challenge me from the tops of my walls;
But my legs are too short, my hips too large,
So I look at them out of my eye corners: these icons, the new Venus figures.

I erased these walls of college blue, of cold concrete;
I denied all those who came before. Did they stack their crates of books
Like the ones I can't live without — Nietzsche, Heinlein, Plato —
Or the 50 records bought at seven dollars each?

Did their clothes make calico amoebas on the floor?
So many ambisexual figures slouch across these walls:
The long-tressed beautiful men, the no-hipped bleached blondes . . .
Maybe all we'll ever have in common is the flowing closet.

There are things some might never have: the poetic photographs,
The picture that hangs in a corner,
A picture of a South African woman,
Body shrouded in gray fabric,
Living her way across the bleached desert,
Two skeletal children for a belt.

Elephant's Graveyard

The same river, one year later, in September —

The milk-bellied bass are hitting;
and the evenings fall
with the same quick shiver
same as last year:

thin as spider's web,
and flee as lifting mist.

Not in this same slip
perhaps,
but one quite similar

the canoes are moored again,
the rattling stringers pulled in,
and a fire is started

as the moon glides into silk
under my breath.

And this time
I vow to remember

the flung constellations,
heat lightning

and the skeletons of fallen trees —

stranded on the rocks,
and pale as ivory.

Shadow and Light

for Ellen Barnett

On a bench a woman sleeps
in the bright sun. Though I have
never come this way I know
this street, the pavement, the curb,
the concrete poured into squares.

The woman on the bench sleeps
with her legs drawn up close
and I don't know whether
I should walk past her sleep
or whether I should wake her,

kneel beside her, touch the shawl
that covers her shoulder.
The street is bright in the sun
and there are no flowers
alongside the walk

only the cedar whose shadows
flow into her hands as she pulls
her shawl together into folds,
to herself. The fringed edge
falls over her shoulders

in small staggering waves
as if it were her hair, light,
combed into strands. It is quiet
on this street and the woman
has gone far away from here.

If I were to go as far away as she
would I remember how in that moment
her dark sleep had pulled me down?

How I, understanding nothing,
had bent over to touch the earth?
How it felt warm with all the light?

The Phone Call across the Date Line

It's time moving that confuses.
As I talk to you now, this late evening,
it is almost yesterday again.
It seems as if the hands of the clock
which hung in the living room
above the piano were held in place.
I remember a summer morning
when its distant clink filled
the still house. It seemed then
as if the air was breathing, somber,
contracting and dilating time.
It seemed as if I, weightless, had been
transposed into a space where waves
are the motion beneath you, where these
become substance, carry you, lift you,
and keep you afloat. I have lived that time
and maybe I could tell you
how things will be. But now
there is this small recognition
of the separate other in each of us,
of things not known or unfamiliar.
Your voice comes out of this distance
as the barely visible thread
a spider releases connecting perhaps
a fern and the roots of a eucalyptus
in the rainforest mountains
near Moreton Bay. It's morning here,
you tell me. The dark echo in your voice,
the small new thing between us, unspoken,
the difference, time, the long distance.

Before Autumn

It was in the summer when I first knew your name,
she tells me. This happened long before fall.
Long before birth. It was then that I named you
after the river. She smiles, laughs almost,
as if she had taken something from the river
and knew the river could not take it back.
I suppose she might have sat down to rest

as she walked alongside the stream that day.
Or maybe she just wanted to be closer
and feel the water on the skin of her hand.
So she bent down. And I think leaning
over me, the child in her body,
round and hard, she saw her own face reflected
time and time over, from her face to mine

imagined in the water. It moved like
the rippling of waves and light breaking, diffused,
repeating the image smaller each time
towards its farthest point where it would dissolve
into the smallest perceivable flutter of light.
Bending, she put one hand on me
and with her other hand she reached

into the water to pick up a stone.
She lifted her hand out, then watched the drops
fall away from her skin and back into the stream.
When the water seemed pure she let the stone
fall, let it sink down to where things lie
still in the river. It ruffled the surface.
Light broke on each wave, dappled the water.

Tod Ibrahim

Being Held

As if cut by a child
and held up against the night
there is the quarter-moon

above the ocean
one-half a *Claddagh* ring
offered from the sand to the sky.

The rim of the moon drops to me now
in pearls across the surface.

At The Butcher's Shop

The clean glass window is lined
with five carcasses of sheep
hanging from their throats by metal
hooks drilled into the white ceiling.
All headless, their front ripped
open starting from the severed neck
to the missing tail, bloodless.
I poke my head inside a stomach
and find it as dark as a room
without lights or furniture, clean
and abandoned, empty of the necessary
organs to sustain a life.
Without the curly fur, the skin
looks plain and pink and pure,
like a baby about to be baptized,
or as a handsome sacrifice for some god.

In the center of the small shop,
the hearts, the tongues, the intestines
are placed on shelves in identical dishes
with bright, red mats underneath them,
one beside the other, like a troop
prepared for a commander's inspection,
behind glass, untouchable and distant.
The dim lights inside the deli case
drift uneasily from one section to another,
blinking this piece of meat then the next,
never all at the same time, as if
terrified to show all the pieces
together assembled in no particular order, complete.

As I order the leg of lamb my mother
asked me to for the Al-Adha feast tomorrow,
I sit on the plastic chair opposite
the carcasses I cannot seem to escape.
Beside the front door, in the corner,
there are two buckets side by side,
indifferently receiving the blood dripping
from the heads without eyes
hanging by the ears nailed to the wall,
like trophies or prized possessions
the owner intends to keep.

I watch the butcher with the white apron
hold the handle of the large knife
tight and close, the blade brilliant
with recent blood glittering in expectation
of some more. The short flight of the knife
first parallel to his shoulder then lowered
quickly to the wooden block, seems endless.
The sound of bone cut precise and exact
reaches my ear. It is his right
hand immersed in dough I am anxious to forget:
swift and graceful as an executioner's hand.

Photographer

Whether perpendicular, or vertical,
or diagonal to the sun, the angle
at which the shot was taken wasn't important.
What mattered was the way this
photograph was choreographed to perform
in a seductive silence distilled of illusions:
not to accuse, or explain, or excuse.
In black and white, it showed four
men buried alive with dirt dumped
from a bulldozer blade. Two soldiers
stood beside it, and a civilian had both
arms on their shoulders, in the all-too-familiar
well-done-must-do-it-again-sometime-soon pat.
The article beneath the picture
described how all four were ordered
at gunpoint to lie face-up on the earth,
legs and arms tied with their belts,
mouths gagged with their socks,
eyes blindfolded with their keffiyahs.
And the bird on the mulberry tree branch,
wings spread, beak upward, feathers ruffled,
heightened the sense of urgency,
of fear, of flight.
All four died of different causes:
the first had a new pacemaker from shock
lost count of heartbeats;
the second suffered from dirtphobia,
like gas, etherized the will to live
or survive, favored the I-give-up attitude;
the third had black worry-beads loose inside
his breastpocket, a severe and serene look
on his face; awaiting a sacrifice or a miracle;
the fourth had somehow untied his hands,
dug a small hole, his right hand suspended
midway, from fatigue or lack of trajectory.
And I imagined the photographer,
the only human witness behind the rock,
thinking of his first Pulitzer prize,
the shades of a tree assassinating
his own shadow, the camera

in his hands, designed to withstand panic,
curved to the right, then to the left,
to arrest elusive sunlight,
as he added a little dangerous footwork:
stood up, knees slightly bent, muscles tensed
from fear, or excitement, or terror of discovery.
His eye confined to a narrow space,
like a keyhole but in reverse:
sees everything, omitted nothing substantial.
Then he'd adjust expensive telephoto lens
as it trimmed insignificant detail:
glorified subject and object indiscriminately,
careful to store the memory of the moment
lest the mind lose the moment from memory.
No flash, no sound, no clash
of cultures or perspectives.
Thought there was no obligation for him
to stay and risk his life,
he continued to balance the camera
so it wouldn't move by the wind
or the horror of the moment,
and as his index finger built enough speed
to dance on the shutter release button
to forever transfix and transform the image—
I couldn't help but think
from the way the picture was blurry
and vague in the middle, faces of
the two soldiers and the civilian
unrecognizable, that even the
sabra photographer behind the camera
had been shaking.

An Old Photograph

for My Grandmother

It was night.
The trees indistinguishable
behind you.

You were standing beside the stone
fence built by your father.
It was almost your height.

The old koran lay open,
undisturbed, touching your right elbow.
A letter placed between the unread pages.

You were wearing an embroidered white
dress with a wide belt.
A prayer rug wrapped around your shoulders like a shawl.

The stove composed
a circle of stones and a few coals
beside your left leg weren't burning.

With the black hair pulled
back in a scarf, your diamond earrings
flashed brilliant solitary lights like fireflies.

You were not smiling.
Brown eyes staring at the moon or the stars
but not at me.

The chicken you so tightly held
was still with a string tied around its leg.
A burned hand buried beneath each wing.

Deafness

I stay awake trying to imagine deep
silence — deeper than the low rush
inside a shell — almost complete.

I think it must be like living in deep water
or sitting in the very center of a glass
bowl with only the sky to listen to.
I remember all the most silent places
I have been and they are not soundless.
Their silence is different.

I have stood in the woods and heard a single
bird call once: its voice didn't break the stillness
but made it deeper, the pause more resonant
after being filled for a moment.
And I have stayed in, in the afternoon,
half-asleep in my parent's house,

when I would suddenly hear the pendulum clock
ticking, as if it had started counting
the seconds again after holding its breath,
louder and louder.

Sounds fill space with a presence like wind;
it is not, itself, tangible but is connected to the motion
of things — a part of it. If I had been
completely deaf since birth,

words would have meaning outside of sound;
they would be movement.

Just as the ear finds voices in the rain or
something shattering on pavement, my eye would
discover shades of speech in the sight of the bowl
breaking.

El Plaza — Lima, Peru

The door to the room that adjoined ours
was unlocked. There were two beds next to
one another but piled on top of them
were other beds — four or five leaning against each other
making a space beneath them
like the inside of a tent. The door leading

to the terrace was open. It was cold, almost damp,
the winter settled between the beds.

I imagined us sleeping there
instead of our own room. We might have felt
like children in a fort made of blankets
resting nervously in each others arms
in our secret hiding place, or as if
we had gone into my parent's room,

long before the divorce, to lie down,
and found the smell of their bodies in the pillow
on my mother's side and in the rumpled sheets,
soft from use and no longer white
but a warm egg-shell color, darkened
on the left side above the blankets
from my father's hair.

We whispered when we went in, staying near our door,
afraid of being caught there. I wanted
to make love in that luxury of beds;
we could have chosen any one of them
then quietly gone out into our room
or to the terrace that looked onto the street.

The morning we left the city I climbed
from our window onto the terrace to take pictures
of the palms along the railing in terra cotta pots
and the dark red wall of the building opposite.
And a woman sleeping in the street, wrapped in a blanket.
She lay against the door of the building as if it would open,
the people passing without noticing her,

where the night before lovers had occupied
every bench without embarrassment. They leaned
toward one another, still and silent, as in the park
near the art museum, in the afternoon,
where so many came because they had no place else.
They stood against the trees holding each other
or lay stretched against one another on the grass,

like a man and woman I saw, when I was little,
in the park behind my parent's house.
The woman lay over the man, straddling him, a blanket
covering them. Her face was hidden next to his;
they didn't see me but I was afraid to walk past,
afraid they sensed me there
as I stood watching.

Electric Storm

The cat is running under the shadows of birds,
low, as if the dark movement posed a threat
or even the bird which doesn't need the earth,
just air — its fullness and emptiness,
its swirling, invisible patterns.

In the last storm, I saw a gull
hit a blank space and falter
as if the wind had suddenly gone elsewhere.
It spun over for an instant
then caught hold again.

It was as if the lightning on the horizon
had touched that small space across from me —
parting the air like a body cutting
through water — leaving the tear.

Once I have been to a place where the sky
is huge, larger than the land, I will see this
differently. The lightning would not open
a hole small enough for only a bird
to fall through, but would rift
like rivers, to pull trees away from
the ground, holding them behind the darkness.

I have heard of men who have survived a knife
in the forehead or the touch of electricity;
if I were caught by the storm with nothing
around me but grasses, I would lie down.
But as the storm passed me I'd want to stand
up and run, to see if I could go between the air into
emptiness before it filled.

Divorce

I've tried the windows of our house
sounded them out with my palms for signs
of life or death, peered into rooms held
together by wheat paste and popsicle sticks.
My arms have memorized the crude geometry
of our trees. They know the curves
of my bare feet resting solidly against them.

In October, when the ground, it seemed
would swell to meet me as I fell
from branch to leaves in mounds below,
landing was distant and painless,
the break of a bone
reset. They say it's stronger there
the bone I mean, after it heals.

From here I can almost feel my
mother leaning over me
trying to wake me to see the eclipse
and I speak to her through my skin
with my whole body: let me sleep
just let me sleep.

I still find myself
chained to that link fence
this broken gate, reaching
for where the wind was,
waiting for them to come home.

Walking

The barn is abandoned but alive with birds
nest-building in the rafters. Each beam
holds their industry. They are busy
and lose pieces of hay that sift through
the air that holds the smell inside
the barn as they fall and fly from rafter
to bale and back. The barn is dark and cool
but we move back into the light
and walk toward the stable.

You are too shy or self-conscious
to look at me as we speak
but while I feed carrots to the horse
or hold her neck in my arms,
my hands tracing the brown length,
as I whisper to her —
I know you are watching.

To you this is a foreign place and I
invite you walking and tell you a story
about a woman I know so civilized
she is afraid of cows and horses,
their strangeness too disturbing to be near.

She would have talked to me
about the architecture of barns,
safe in the space of lines and wood
precisely measured. She would
have flinched from the horse's muzzle
reaching toward her as you did.

I don't tell you that her mouth was thin
and set against desire or that I wanted it
the way I wanted to feel her heart
through my hand, a wing-beat.

Fathers

for Barbara

In your basement we danced with our reflections
in the sliding glass door to anything soul,
our hair in neat rows of curlers and no boys around.
Your father was a shadow that spoke
from a chair in the living room,
highball and Chesterfields in hand,
his space reduced by female adolescence
and what little he said always embarrassed you.

In those green wet summers we shaved our legs,
bought our first garter belts, started our periods and
wore too much make-up.
The house smelled of Shalimar.
And our mothers presided proud over our bras
and tampons while we were falling out of love with them,
become more than they had been over a summer night,
convinced they hadn't made love in years.

What were our fathers then, silent observers,
absences we flirted with. Now twenty years later
we sit arm in arm in your parent's same house
your mother's white orchids fill the front window,
the furniture the same only re-covered,
your father dead one day, the house reclaimed
by the women. And you wondering, but not out loud,
how it is you couldn't know each other.

By Childhood Erased

It is in the way it returns when I am certain
it no longer has the power to return again
into the privacy of my dreams or acts of love.
The way it comes into my mind and shows
itself to me — visual, visceral —
as I hold a woman, the room in darkness,
while we are making love,
are breathing wet together.
When being open becomes dangerous
and the movement of our bodies
is stopped by remembering
the child coerced, who said yes
because she loved someone
older because she loved someone
powerful. She does not know
consent or that twenty years later,
when everything she has learned unravels her,
when she must remember all
she pushed back to forget
the feel of powerful hands
the fear of being caught
of being punished more
the fear that she said yes because she wanted,
at 6, to know about sex.
Or how it was that later, when I said stop,
it stopped — that easy —
it stopped. Except the words
always called to me in his voice or my own
don't tell . . . your fault.

Red Lane

Kevin Craft



Pieces of Earth

It wasn't midnight. Mama said that midnight was too dramatic to be useful anymore. Instead, Sugar rose from her bed, washed, and threw on her brown house robe when the hour felt right in her bones, when she felt that day and night were present together and turned with each other like the partners in a reel. Mama Paro sat rocking in a corner with her eyes closed, her body swaying smoothly back and forth, humming wordlessly while Sugar set her materials before her.

Sugar resisted looking at the wall clock. She concentrated on the feeling in her body and the quivering just below her belly button. She watched her fingers move gracefully to the mortar and pestle, then to a green and brown mass of dried herbs on her left, then back to the mortar as if she knew what she was about. Grind and mix and grind again, she told herself, until each plant released its sharpness to the air and mingled, in scent and form, with every other plant in the bowl of polished rosewood. Vervain, snake root, black berry, sweet gum, may apple, mustard, rose, yarrow, almond. When all were mixed in the bowl, Sugar turned to a pair of small crucibles suspended over two matching candles. With tongs she removed the crucible on her right and poured the oil it contained, hot and clear, into the wooden bowl, stirring and chanting. She paused and considered before reaching for the second crucible and adding a few drops of its contents to the bowl, mixing the milky drops of tallow carefully and in silence.

Sugar took the bowl into her hands and pulled it into her lap, both palms against its sides and her fingertips overlapping. Her thumbs almost touched each other on the hardwood grain. With her wind-voice, the voice that beat in blood and soul, she called on the Hidden One and was lost in Her answer.

Mama Paro took the bowl from Sugar's slackened hands as she knelt beside the younger woman. She set the bowl behind her. "She answered, didn't She?"

"Yes," Sugar whispered, staring at Mama with eyes that refused to focus properly. She wiped at the sweat on her brow.

"She called you by name?"

"Yes."

"And you answered?"

"Yes."

Mama smiled. "And now you are Hers."

Yes, Sugar thought, Hers and yours. Her head hung so low she could smell the oil in the bowl on the floor, forgotten and discarded by Mama since it had served its purpose. There was a pleasant, flowered sweetness

perceptible beneath the sharp tang of mustard. There could be no back-sliding from this moment on, Sugar knew. The Hidden One would call her back to the Art, to that beating of the blood and the quivering in the spine, the start of a new addiction. This night, the Other finally took possession of Mama Paro's girl. Sugar felt branded and tender and helpless, like a roach on its back waiting for the sole of a human foot. She knew that love and devotion to Her would come. Perhaps with the sun's rising. Mama told her that the Hidden One could whisper like a lover and rock Her children to sleep in Her arms. Sugar believed all this but had a headache anyway.

Mama Paro watched her for a moment longer before moving to turn on the air conditioner. As the ancient thing came to life, it started rattling as something loose in its gut blew back and forth in the weak currents it generated. Mama had to raise her voice to be heard above the noise. "Leave the clean-up to me, Sugar. Get to bed."

Sugar rose heavily to her feet and went to her room with no ceremony. Her smooth features were drawn tight into a sixty year old's death mask. She didn't say what she saw when she spoke Jess' name in the Silence. She didn't say how afraid she was of what she had seen.

II

Nattie was returning home, though she had sworn she never would. Hours before Nattie was due, Mama's baking and cleaning had made it impossible for Sugar to stay anywhere under the roof in peace so she took to the small, clear stream that darted and murmured the hundred feet to the bayou. She sat on a rock and watched the water play around the fringes of algae, water weeds, and kudzu leaves. It was just hot enough to put a thin film of sweat on a body which sat unmoving under the shade of a large and twisted oak.

Nattie was Mama Paro's daughter. Jacques Vadesan was her father. Vadesan had been a slight, laughing man with darting eyes and grey hair. He had been an old man when he walked Ann Paro down the aisle. Fifty-five or older. He just managed to father a child when a fever took him in late summer, when the waters grow a thick layer of green scum and mosquitoes. Mama Paro had been twenty-one and alone with her girl on the edge of the parish. The people of that place had always thought it was ironic that the Witch Paro couldn't save her own husband. But Mama always taught that every good healer respects Death, which is always there, a lover gibbering quietly in the corner. Nattie had lived in the shadow of a thousand unseen forces, just as she lived surrounded by herbs, mojo bags, and chants, alone with her mother at the edge of the parish. Nattie, both sister and cousin, is on her way home, Sugar thought, and I can't quite make myself feel pleased.

"No," Nattie said softly, her eyes darting over the shelves, counters, and chests of the shop.

"I'm sorry, Angel," Mama Paro said. She put an arm around her daughter's waist. "You said you were never coming back. I took you at your word."

"But it was my room!"

"And you gave it back to me," Mama said.

Neither woman entered the room. They stood unsure in the doorway with their arms around each other. Sugar brushed past them both to stand in the square made by the counters and the wall. There were oaken planks laid over the concrete. Sugar could just make out where the old walls, original to the house, met the newer walls of the addition. The room was large and clean, the shelves behind the glass counters were mounted evenly and stocked with jars and smaller cork-stopped bottles. Two black curtains separated the shop into sections: the largest was an open area for shoppers and browsers, the left side alcove was for Mama's private consultations with her clients, and Sugar had set up a workroom in the right side alcove. Sugar raised her arms and did a slow turn. "But isn't it wonderful, Nattie? It's what Mama always wanted. There's not another business like this anywhere." She glided up playfully to Nattie, wrapped her arms around the smaller, bird-like woman and hoisted her into the room. "Aw, don't get an attitude, Coz. Can't you see we're expanding?"

"I can see that you've expanded me right out of my bedroom." Nattie paced the floor moodily in a green cotton dress before coming to rest against one of the counters. "So, when did all this happen?"

"Three years ago, babe." Mama walked into the shop, picked up a dust cloth and idly swiped at one of the display cases. "Sugar started practicing almost four years ago. The two of us together were able to make enough for it. Got people coming around from as far as the other side of Lake Ponchartrain."

"I want my bed," Nattie said with that stubborn pout that wasn't quite as endearing in the twenty-six year old as it had been in the teenager.

"Your bed is in the workshop, Nattie." Sugar pulled aside a curtain. "It's even in the same spot you used to keep it."

Nattie's eyes danced over the shelves in the shop and said nothing.

"Look, girl," Mama said, "nothing is going to jump out at you. And it is your room. A part of it, anyway. There aren't any demons on the shelves."

"I don't like the way it smells in here."

"It smells like a garden, Nattie."

"If you like it, Coz, why don't you sleep here and enjoy it?"

Sugar had just settled herself in for the night when she heard light and hasty footsteps. She watched her cousin push back the curtain slowly, peer in, and enter, closing the curtain carefully behind her. "You know," Sugar said evenly, "there's nothing for you to be afraid of."

"I know no such thing," Nattie teased with a slight tremor in her voice. "I can't even get to sleep in your bed for thinking of what could be preying on my sweet, little Coz. Magic," Nattie said with a total-body shudder. She

leaped onto the bed beside Sugar.

"Your sweet, little Coz is partly responsible for everything you see." Sugar waved an arm to indicate the rest of the room.

"Yeah." Nattie's eyes held Sugar. It had always amazed her that Nattie could stop the bouncing of her eyes and gaze as directly and as forcefully as her mother. "Mama loves you for that. I admire you for that."

Sugar grabbed a pillow and began beating it energetically. "T'weren't nothing, ma'am."

"I'm trying to be straight, Sugar. I admire you. I felt so stupid today. I think I hurt Ma, the way I acted the fool and made you give up your room. I should be used to Mama's trade by now. I don't know why this room makes me quiver. And after you had worked so hard to put everything like it was. With the exception of my room, of course. I'll apologize to Mama in the morning."

"You won't do anything like that. You've been away for eight years. Give yourself some room. Your tolerance for all this hocus-pocus shit is way down. A couple days and you'll be chanting right along. As to the other, everything is like it was because this place doesn't change. You know that. Lord knows I didn't do much work."

"You mended my quilt, cousin." Nattie stroked the green and blue quilt at the foot of the bed. She was clearly touched.

"I mended our quilt, cousin, some time ago," Sugar admitted. "I wanted to do a lot of things for your homecoming, Nat. But there wasn't a thing in the house, in the shop, or in the garden that I could lay my hand to without Mama squaking at me about how I can't manage to do anything properly. She was vicious today, Nat. Try as I might, she'd drop whatever she was doing and chase me out."

Nattie started to laugh. "It must have been frustrating."

Sugar snorted. "Hope you spent some time with her to make her happy. Then at least my sufferings were worth something."

"We talked. I just finished rocking her to sleep. It doesn't make up much for all the letters I didn't write, does it, Sugar?"

Sugar felt an urge to be kind. She surrendered to the feeling. "It's a start. You've made a start."

Nattie seemed to chew on that for a while, her eyes half-closed as if listening for something. She started at the sudden and loud chirp of a cricket. "Well, girl, gotta run to bed." She grinned cheerfully, "Literally, that is." Nattie disappeared with a rustling of black curtain. Sugar could hear the wet slapping of bare feet as her sister-cousin raced past the shelves of the darkened shop and into the safety of the kitchen.

Left alone to herself in the quiet, Sugar wished for a place to run. But there was none. She sat stiffly under the quilt, watching with her mind another woman prepare for bed, trying to dissolve the fear where it had congealed, a writhing fist in her stomach.

III

Mama looked relaxed and content after breakfast. The lines in her brow had disappeared with Nattie's arrival and a peaceful night's sleep had put the usual glow in her dark skin. Sugar felt awkward, surrounded by the happiness of mother and daughter. Mama and Nattie took their laughter into every room of the house looking for old photographs and dusty family albums. Sugar watched.

Her arms almost buried with the fruits of the great search, Nattie threw herself on the couch and opened one of the larger books. She made a disgusted sound. A dry cutting fell from its place between two pages of the book and floated down to her toes. Across the top of the page a child's hand had scrawled "Bloodroot" in red crayon. "Yours, Sugar?" Nattie asked with a lift of one eyebrow.

"How did you guess? Hand it here."

"What? And leave me ignorant? I need to study this stuff, seeing as we are running a profitable business here."

"Don't be silly, Nat. You didn't want to know diddly about the Craft before you left. Why should you bother to learn now?" Mama cheerfully dumped her handfuls of yellowed film on the coffee table.

"I wasn't planning to stay before." Nattie wasn't looking at her mother. She was looking at Sugar.

Mama stayed very still. "And you plan to stay now?"

"Yes."

Sugar was certain that Nattie expected a sign from her. Maybe she needed to know that everything would be okay, the two of them, under Mama Paro's roof. Sugar watched the silence and let it grow undisturbed.

"I watched the arms all day. You know, the little, computerized robot arms made to put rivets into pieces and attach small pieces to bigger pieces. They look like your arm would if you lengthened it by a couple feet, thickened it a couple inches, stripped all the flesh off it, and then put little red and blue wires and flashing lights all along the bone. Lines of bones going down a hall longer than a football field, blinking and clattering at each other as they handled metal. And I watched. For six dollars and fifty cents an hour I watched those lifeless things work. I had this red button under my finger, the 'trouble button'. Press that and all those forearms and biceps would halt and stand there, waiting for me, silent like dead things were meant to be."

Nattie reclined against the wall of the shop on a stool, her arm resting on a shelf holding candles. Wax candles, oil candles, candles in jars. Some were labeled by function: protection, exorcism, love and fertility. They looked slippery in the heat. Mama perched on her stool by the air conditioner, braiding a red cord. Sugar had the latest invoices spread before her. Her eyes had not touched paper since Nattie began.

"Stan worked down where they poured the metal into molds. He was in a complex separate from mine. A lot of men worked there. Some of them

made twenty-five dollars an hour. Stan was getting thirteen, which was good 'cause he's about as skilled as a calf and not even that bright," Nattie snickered.

"Then you could have worked down there."

"Only men could work down there, Mama." Nattie raised her hand in a gesture of silence. "Now don't get all zealous on me, Sugar. You don't know anything. It's hot down there and it smells like sulphur. They pour liquid metal from big vats. It's dark, too, except for the glow of melted aluminum or whatever. Stan used to say that he could see little devils prancing on brimstone in the corner of his eye. He couldn't turn his head but for seeing them. And he'd get burned all the time from when something spilt or fell or when he bumped into something hot (and everything was always hot). The hairs on his arms got singed off and his skin kept peeling. He was either as flaky as a leper or soft and raw as a babe from all the new skin he'd have to grow back. I know you, Sugar. You would have jumped into that pit for principle's sake. Men can have that as far as I'm concerned. If they want to reserve for themselves that hell on Earth, or any other hell for that matter, let them."

"It's a matter of money, Nat," Sugar explained.

"Money," Nattie said patiently, "is nothing when you're peeling all the time and seeing Satan everywhere." She met Sugar's wide, black eyes. "It takes something out of you. It took a lot out of Stan. When we first got those jobs, everything was cozy. We would come home together on the bus holding hands. Stan would collapse all burnt and flaky on the living room couch. I would be too sick with the ups and downs, rights and lefts of those damn arms to think of eating. So I would be right beside him on the couch talking about money and houses and kids, someday, who would never see the green waters of a bayou or know the taste of crawdad. We never talked of cars, not when we spent the light of day smelling them and making them and counting the tiny pieces of them. We could have afforded one, but we were waiting to grow tired of the smell of bus exhaust.

"Anyway, there we would sit until the coffee table stopped going up and down before my eyes and I got up to cook something in the kitchen. Stan would hit the shower. He'd scrub himself raw in that old tub. He said that it wasn't gentlemanly for a flaky man to make his wife hold him. He would come out and hug my butt while I cooked, just as raw and skinless as he could be, holding on to my butt as if he was doing more than being a nuisance. Not that he was too great a nuisance. It feels nice, Sugar, when you're tired, to have some quiet, raw man in a purple bathrobe hugging your butt as if it held some answer all on its own." Nattie sighed and stared at her fingers lying near a harmless-looking candle.

"Those are the times I remember most. The quiet times when there wasn't anyplace, anyone else but that kitchen, that sofa, that one man. Even nights when we could reach past the layers of tired and memories of hell and dead arms, even those nights won't stay pure in my head as those other moments did. Nights, especially loving nights, are soft, they melt into mist that fills you up somehow. The times on a sofa or in a kitchen just lead you on and

tell you what a night is for. They lead you on and when you're alone they chase you and tell you that you've got no good reason being alone.

"We had money. We worked hard so we had money. But we were always saving it for one thing or another. We were always saving and we never spent on something that would give us pleasure. We counted on each other for that, we counted on those moments. And they weren't enough. They couldn't do it for us. The tired started taking us in and pretty soon the smell of him, showered and in his bathrobe, couldn't get past the aching in my back. And he couldn't hold on to me the way he used to in the kitchen. He couldn't sway anymore with my movement or the movement of pots and pans. Nights were for sleeping.

"But it was slow, Sugar. It crept up on us. I think it took all of five years to say to myself, 'Something is wrong, Nat.' But it was just annoying, you know, nothing to bawl about. Then it happened one day after a whole month, yes, a month I think, that Stan and I hadn't loved each other. Maybe it was longer than that. At any rate, I had this real vague ache all over my body. It was so bad that, tired as I was, I didn't even want to lie down with that feeling in the dark and quiet of the bedroom. So I stayed up and watched a movie while Stan went to bed. After about an hour I gave in and my hand was right on the bedroom door when I heard Stan sighing from the other side. I wondered what he was up to. I edged the door open and peaked inside. And there he was, lying in bed with a magazine spread out on the covers — and I could guess what kind of magazine it was because all the color I could see on the page was the flesh tones of white people — while he was just banging away at himself. What the hell, I thought, is he doing, as tired as he said he was, banging away at himself until I thought the poor thing would fall off?

"There was something about the motion of his hand that reminded me of work and of how, at the push of one button, I could stop his arm. But only for a while. They only go up and down, those arms, and left and right. They don't need anybody to help them do what they do. I can tell the supervisor that I pushed the button because I had thought the arms had gotten ahead of themselves. And he'd tell me that I lied, that I'd pushed the button because they had gotten ahead of me and that's not a good enough reason to stop them. And there he was, not needing me or wanting me, doing what he had to get done with the movements of a hand."

So that's what did it to you, Sugar thought. That's what brought you home when I couldn't, when Mama couldn't. Playing games when his woman wasn't looking, or when he thought she wasn't looking, with a magazine full of white women. It was ridiculous to think that this could be unpardonable when other horrors were springing from bedrooms. But Sugar wouldn't think of that, not now.

"Do you get it, Sugar? He had all he wanted right there, without me: some pages and an arm. Too much for me. So I let him have it, all of it, everything he wanted. And I left him. Do you see, Sugar?"

It was the note of pleading in her voice that took Sugar. Not the words. The voice made her say, "I see," when actually, she could see very little.

Nattie and Jess Dumar had never gotten along well. They were old rivals and the parish, with nothing to do during the winter months but eat and gossip, spurred on their rivalry like an audience at a wrestling match. Dumar was, the parish said, hands down the prettiest little girl from 1969-1972. Then Nattie took her title when Dumar had to get braces. Off came the braces in '75 and Dumar won the parish until Nattie learned to dance like sin itself and became reigning sexpot (the title had to mature with the rivals). She reigned right up to the moment she abandoned the bayou to find something larger than a backwater parish to call her own. And she returned only to look Jess Dumar in the face and know she had lost.

It's my mouth, Nattie thought with a sigh. Eight years of searching and working and watching her man masturbate had put a hardness into the line of her mouth. Nattie could take an old picture from her high school days and catalogue the changes around her lips: the way they turned down a bit more when she smiled, the way they didn't uncover her teeth as much as they used to, the way smiles came with more effort as the time went by. Sugar said the changes made her look stronger, like a woman who knew something instead of the laughing, silly creature she had been. But Sugar is just the kind of hairpin to love what men don't care for, Nattie thought. Like the harder line of her mouth.

To be honest, and Nattie was usually quite honest in her appraisals, Dumar had changed as well. Not around her heavy lips but around her eyes. They were hooded, dull, dark. Maybe some mystery in them when before they had been as open and as bright as the french windows in her father's house. Dumar stood quietly before Nattie's open scrutiny on the front porch. Nattie crowned her silent figure with a nod. "It's been a long time, Dumar."

Dumar smiled. "Surely. Did you miss me, Vadesan?"

Nattie smiled. "Surely. I'm glad you came by to see me."

"To tell the truth, I didn't know you were back in town. I'm pleased to see you all the same. Where did you go?"

"Detroit."

"Ah. Good jobs out there."

"Yes, good jobs. But I think I'll stay here for a while. I need rest." Nattie paused for a moment before digging in. "Remember how we had this town split, Dumar? What was it like, having it all to yourself for the first time?"

"To tell the truth, I don't get out much anymore. I haven't had much time to enjoy having the whole town. I won't miss it. In fact," Dumar smiled and bowed slowly. "If you are staying, Vadesan, St. Andrew's is yours."

"Who was that?" Mama was putting the dinner dishes away.

"Dumar."

"Jess."

"Whatever. I thought she'd come by to try to rile me like in the old days. But she came to see Sugar. Odd, isn't it?"

"Not the least. Sugar and Jess get along very well. They have ever since you left."

"Sugar must've been real damn lonely. Lonely enough to put up with her hoity-toity, moneyed ways. Her folks still on the coast?"

"Mostly in New Orleans now. Her father's people. They had her marry some Sommerville fellow, son of a trading family. Uncle Dumar wants the whole Cajun banana it seems. Jess was part of the deal. At least, that's what folks say."

"Rich, this Sommerville man?"

"Filthy with it. He's in St. Andrew's now, at the old Dumar place."

"So, Dumar wins the game after all." Nattie was concentrating too hard to keep the bitterness out of her voice to notice that she had failed completely.

"Not quite." Mama faced her daughter and in the same tone of voice she might have said "bugs got in my roses," said, "Moss Jones told me that you could hear Sommerville beating her a good fifty feet from the front yard."

"It doesn't make any sense, Sugar."

"It doesn't have to. Just do what I tell you."

"Listen to what you're saying. I rub this potion on my stuff and it will make somebody love me."

"Right."

"Sugar, if I could get somebody close enough down there to smell a bit of scented water dabbed on my Clarissa, I don't need a love potion."

"It's not for smelling."

"You bet she isn't."

"I mean the potion, idiot. And you don't just put it on . . . 'Clarissa' either. You put it everywhere down there."

"Even at the entrance to my funnel box?"

"Don't you know the decent names for anything? I'd have sworn that a lady like you would use a few proper names."

"Will it irritate me?"

"Not as much as you irritate me."

"If it's like bubble bath . . ."

"It's not bubble bath. Jess, I made this stuff!"

"Sweet Sugar," Jess teased softly. "Tell me, am I supposed to use big circles or little circles when I put it on?"

"Don't tease yourself. Just dab it on."

"I want circles."

"Then hell, use big circles and then use small circles. Then dance around naked with a broom. I don't care."

"Exasperated, hon?"

"You're a filthy woman."

"So filthy, I'm going to tell you the difference between big circles and small circles."

They were sitting in Sugar's new room, curtained off from the rest of the

shop. Sugar sat at the head of the bed, her legs folded under her, facing Jess who sat at the foot. There were three small bottles on the quilt between them marked "Love" with typed labels. One was dark yellow, the middle was light yellow, the last, clear. Their smell still lingered in the air. Jess opened each in turn, being silly, speculating as to the kind of lover each would attract and how big the circles should be for its application. It didn't matter which she chose. Jess Dumar Sommerville didn't need a love potion. She needed a dead husband.

But Jess would pick a bottle from the quilt that held both women. She would pick one even though she knew she would never use it. And in payment, she would give Sugar a pair of jeans or a couple of blouses. The richest woman in the parish had no money anymore. So she bartered away her wardrobe and gave to Sugar when she never had to. Jess would laugh as she watched the other woman squeeze into shirts too narrow for her shoulders but too large for her chest. Then she would sidle over to Mama's sewing machine to nip, hem, and tuck, altering her clothes to fit another.

All that would come later, after they sat and laughed and talked about everything but what happened at night. Sugar thought that maybe someday she would say how much she hated taking Jess' clothes and how she found herself, at odd moments, while wearing those blouses, with her arms thrown across her ribcage, holding. And do you remember me, Sugar wanted to ask, when I was a child and you and Nattie were racing, rivals always, and how I plodded along behind you both with legs shorter and younger and slower? You grabbed my hand suddenly and pulled me along with you so that when Nattie tripped I beat her at the run for the first and the last time ever. With you holding my hand. We danced at the top of the hill while Nattie climbed after us and walked past us a few yards, acting like it wasn't important, angry at you for winning (because tripping didn't matter then) and not even noticing my betrayal. We were sick with laughter and speed at the top of the hill. So sick, you went down to your knees with your hands to your sides, hurting. You called to me, not Nattie who was your age and just as fast, but me, Sugar, who was always too slow and would stay, when all the other young people left the bayous forever. I put my hands to your sides and made it better. We went down the hill. Nattie first. Then you and I.

But Sugar didn't ask. Instead, she sat with her hands before her on the quilt and watched the laughter and the light play in Jess' once hazel, now brown eyes. Sugar wondered when Jess would give up. Hoping can't last forever. When its gone, there is nothing to stand between you and your grave. Sugar could hear the gibbering of the shadow at the edge of the quilt. "One must respect limits," Mama had said.

When it was an hour and a half until dark, Sugar reached across the quilt and gently brushed away the hair on the side of the other woman's face. Below her left temple and near the ear there was a small, easily hidden bruise. Considerate of him, thought Sugar. Jess sat quietly while Sugar touched it, then stroked it with ointment on her fingertips. Jess never winced. She never moved.

"It's a bad one."

"Ah," Jess nodded. "It felt like a bad one."

Sugar reached for her hands, the ointment making her fingers sticky and strange-smelling. "Come to me tomorrow. I will make something special for it when you come tomorrow."

"Yes." Jess smiled as she scooped up the middle bottle from the quilt, the one applied with patient circles, and began rummaging through her duffel bag. She pulled out a powder blue t-shirt and spread it over the remaining two bottles labeled "Love." "What do you think, Sugar? I like you in blue."

"Right after you left, she started coming by almost every day. She'd pick up a doll for some cousin in Tennessee. One of the ones Mama makes with all the threads. Or maybe she'd buy some tonic for her hair. She liked the quiet of the house, the way it smells when Mama is at work, all the candles and other weird stuff. She couldn't imagine what half the stuff was used for, she'd say, but she could get an almost-whiff of magic stored in the jars lying around. I spent a lot of time explaining the Craft to her. And she would say the damndest things. Smut on the brain like you wouldn't believe. She's silly too." Sugar examined the pile of leaves on the small square cloth in front of her, carefully sprinkling a pungent brown powder over the heap. She ignored Nattie's impatient fidgeting because it had to be just right. Too strong and the poultice would enflame the soft skin by the ear. Too weak, the swelling and discoloration would get worse.

"One day, she came in and told me she had this powerful nightmare about her father. She had them every now and then. About once a month. They're so awful, she told me once, that she can just barely keep her mind in order. You missed seeing the way old Dumar died. Got drunk one night and passed out on a railroad tie. A foggy night. He was found at dawn all twisted and pulpy. Some fool recognized the ring on his finger and brought Jess out to see the sight first thing. After that, she could hardly think of him at all without seeing him in her mind, all tangled up with himself, with the flies and the birds and the blood. I felt sorry for her so I decided to teach her the Silence. She'd come to the shop after closing and practice it with me. She paid me for it. Ten dollars a week.

"Sommerville came in Spring about a year ago. Her uncle got tired of having a Dumar girl somewhere off by herself, not doing anything for the family. So he decides to marry her off to some up and coming somebody he wanted to keep his finger on. Jess went along with it. Partly because Uncle threatened to make life difficult for her in her father's house, and partly because that's what they do on her side of town. They marry when they think it's necessary and spend the rest of their lives being cordial to each other.

"I'm not sure when it started. She still came to me after closing. But she had these tiny, vicious bruises on her like the marks little monsters would make. He must be hitting her with something hard. He never uses his hands. And it's never the same something from day to day because the bruises are

always different. But they're all tiny and vicious.

"I nearly screamed when I saw the latest one, Nat. Right on the side of her head, near her temple." Sugar felt ashamed of herself. She didn't want to catalogue all the wounds. That was Jess' story if she ever chose to tell it. But there was something cleansing about describing them, just as there was something obsessive about holding those secrets too tightly. "So she can't move when he's working her over. She does and she dies. He went up and down her thighs once, right along a nerve. Could have crippled her. Bastard must be a goddamn surgeon.

"Funny, isn't it Nat, how just today you were saying that you left a man because you caught him playing with himself. Jess doesn't even care for Sommerville, yet there she is. And she won't leave him. She won't leave her place. She said, 'Sugar, you can't leave a place when you know it's yours and you may never make anything like it again. You hold on to it and hope something might happen to make everything right. You understand, Sugar. You stayed.' All I understand is that she needs to be a widow if she can't leave. Or she'll die. She'll stop eating or move a little to the left the next time he comes at her. And I can't bear the thought of that, Nattie." The poultice was sewn shut and lay in Sugar's hand, forgotten.

"Promise me," Nattie whispered, "promise me you won't do anything. You can't rescue a woman who doesn't know when to fly. Sooner or later, she'd get you into trouble and you won't be able to get out. If you're a healer, just heal."

"How can I heal her when he tears her up as soon as I'm done? Right before Sommerville came, Nattie, Jess dreamed about her father. She was sitting on his lap while he read to her about Jack and the Beanstalk. She was wearing her new yellow dress with all the lace and tiny, bright new shoes. He was alive. No gravel or intestines. He was whole. I gave her that. She was whole. Then Sommerville came and tore her apart all over again."

"Then help her leave. If she won't leave she has to deal with it."

"You know what your problem is, Nat? You don't know what a place is. You left home to make yourself a new place because St. Andrew's wasn't enough. But you can't make places. You can't say to a piece of ground, 'I'm yours and you're mine.' It doesn't work like that. And you shouldn't even think of building a new place (which you can't do anyway) when you haven't even left the old one behind. So you abandoned your home here, went North, met a man with a chronic skin condition, and plunked yourself down like you had actually done something, like you really thought you had left us behind. No letters. No calls. No home in St. Andrew's. Just in Detroit. But tell me, Nattie, how many men and women play with themselves when nobody is looking? Even when somebody is looking? Millions, that's how many. And as soon as you catch your husband with his dick in his fist you wing it back home as if he ate your children. Jess can't leave her place. You didn't leave yours. That's what a real place is. It reels you in and keeps you in and writes its name across your forehead."

"Sugar," Nattie said slowly, "that has to be the stupidest, most depressing pile of garbage I've ever heard. And if that's what Jess thinks, then you

deserve each other. And you can keep making those," Nattie's gesture indicated the poultice, "until one of you drops dead."

"No. I'm not going to make another one. Not for Jess."

"Fool! You're a damn fool!"

"Probably. But I know why you came back. I know why you came back to this swamp, which you hate, the people you dislike, and the witchcraft you've feared since you were born. It's not because of Stan. You came back because you are your mother's daughter and there is no place out there for you. Not when the Hidden One whispers in your ear and tells you that your legs weren't made for walking."

Mama Paro had been briefed on the skirmish by both her girls, the one she bore and the one who stayed. Sugar's report had been clipped and surly. Nattie had been confused and angry. Mama sat quietly in her bed and tried to sort it all out. It was clear that she had to intervene. She couldn't let them go on half-heartedly mangling each other and talking about her home as if it were a treacherous patch of quicksand. And Sugar had been way too close to slapping Nattie senseless over Jess Sommerville for Mama not to be alarmed.

It wasn't the lurking violence that kept Mama up all night. It was the way the anger erupted and poured down other paths. It was the appearance of rage in a woman she always believed to be serenity itself. Mama had put her faith in Sugar's perfect calm, in the personality that expressed itself either with gestures of love or clouds of silence.

She could remember the way baby Sugar had lain content in Harriet's arms while Mama, desperate, argued with her sister, also a child, what should be done with the little one. Sugar cooed and played with her toes, her cooing filling the room and becoming larger than the sisters and their fears, large enough to swallow every other sound in the parish. That was all there was between the two women: the love sounds of a baby. Magic. Mama, who was raising one girl alone already, who didn't want another, who couldn't take another, who swore she would not even touch Harriet's baby, took Sugar into her arms. The baby's soft, black eyes laughed at her for thinking, even for a moment, that she could possibly have done without another girl.

There is something terribly wrong, Mama decided. Something about having Jess and Sugar and Nattie together in one town. Some energy combinations should never be tried. And it couldn't be fixed. The pattern had to finish its course. Mama saw her life as a perfect sphere, rolling easily from cycle to cycle, beginning to end to beginning again. Nothing could tear her the way the world used to tear her, the way Sugar and Jess and Nat were tearing. The women were shapes with edges, tumbling in chaos beside her. Sugar and Nat would right themselves. Of that she was sure. Her girls had to right themselves if she were to keep her own course. But there would be little pieces of woman's flesh everywhere. The edges had to come off. And maybe, if Sugar was not afraid, if Sugar was angry enough, maybe Jess

would be righted as well. But all the little pieces.

Sugar was in bed trying to see Jess. She would have finished her period of Silence by this time, Sugar thought. Jess had said that she kept up her practice. Jess had said that it kept away the nightmares of her father. But she lied. Sugar knew she lied. Because when it happened, it had to happen in the evening, before bedtime. Those bruises told the tale. Earlier this evening her husband had picked up something small and hard and hit her with it. He concentrated with his brows beetling above the bridge of his nose. There were beads of sweat. He had to be precise or his wife would die. And Jess couldn't move. He had the head of her father's walking cane in his hand, perhaps. Or the crystal ball Sugar had given her for her birthday. And Jess hadn't moved. It wasn't time to die just yet. When he finished, she watched him collapse into bed. He snored.

So Jess goes to the bathroom. She vomits. She cleans her mouth and sits in the Silence that I taught her when we sat in a room as small and warm as a womb with the world held back by a black velvet curtain. She sits in the Silence but it does no good so she climbs into bed beside him, beside his heavier, stronger, meaner hands and the heat of his body. He snores. She thinks about me, Sugar thought, she thinks about me thinking about her in my bed, in her bed beside him. She thinks about how I could strike him if I wanted, call the Hidden One to take him, bring down something ancient and dire to stop him where his heavy body breathes beside her. Some spell dire and primordial, saved all these years and passed from woman's lips to woman's lips when the need came, as it does so often, and she could dress in funeral black at the end of the week. "Because I can't leave," Jess thinks, "though I hate it here beside him, he must leave, since someone must leave. And I cannot call the Hidden One to take him."

I can and do not, Sugar thought, though I can see them as if I were suspended under her ceiling. I could make it better for her but I do not, as if I could heal here and stay here without Jess Dumar somewhere nearby. So we will watch each other tonight, me watching her beside him, her watching me watch her, wondering who will move first. Waiting for her to start dying or for me to take him, we lie in bed. The corners of her eyes are wet.

Nattie, for her part, was awake as well, thinking about love and how it's made. It seemed a natural thing to do when one is alone in bed and the world is as quiet as a church.

V

It was just after noon and the whole sky had taken on the color of the sun. Beneath the angry yellow of the sky, the world was hazy and full of the smell of leaves. Nattie looked back at the path in the woods she had just left. It had been cooler in there, but much less breathable. She had come the

back way, the hidden way, to the Dumar house. She had come looking for Sugar.

Now that she had found her, she wanted to turn around and go home. Sugar was sitting in front of the house, sitting on the hood of a British Sterling, contemplating an oak branch longer than her arm. Nattie watched her from the shade of the house, pressed against its wall. Mama had told her to creep like a thief while she searched for her cousin. "Don't let Sommerville see you," she had said, "just see if you can bring Sugar home." So Nattie had walked three miles instead of driving, had cut herself on branches going through the woods instead of using the road, had worn out her knees creeping in the shade of Dumar's home in the sweaty heat. It angered her to no end to discover Sugar lounging at ease in full view of the enemy.

"Sugar, get down from there!"

Sugar seemed startled at first, then turned to gaze serenely at her cousin hissing in the shade. "What?"

"I said, get down from there!"

"Oh." Sugar lifted her arms and slid down the windshield of the car, then scooted her way across the engine block to put her feet upon the ground. She leaned against the shining fender. "Been here before, Nattie? I have. She used to bring me here before Sommerville came. We played football on the lawn. We even had barbecues here twice . . . no, three times." Sugar opened her arms and embraced the wide lawns to all four sides of one of the largest houses in St. Andrew's. "That's what I love about this place. So much green and not one inch of it of any use to anybody. You play on it. You enjoy looking at it. You don't eat it or brew it. Wonderful."

"Come home now, Coz."

"You know, she had to have the driveway fixed last Spring," Sugar said, studying the cobblestones beneath her feet. "After the freeze and the rains, they were all coming loose. Even the ones in the back driveway. So she had me come over when the workmen came. She wanted me to keep her company when all those strange men were prowling all over her place. The headman came over and said, 'Miss, your cobblestones this,' and, 'Miss, your cobblestones that.' Jess said, 'My cobblestones this,' and 'My driveway that.' She drove me home afterward, glowing all over, and gave Mama a big basket of mint and a bushel of tomatoes she had grown herself. 'I want you to have this,' she said."

Sugar pulled a foot-long dagger from somewhere behind her back and laid it flat against the oaken branch in her left hand. She slid the blade carefully along the length of the wood, peeling a thin layer of it away to lie in a curl at her feet. "Don't you get it, Nattie?"

Nattie recognized the dagger. It was Sugar's witchwork blade, used for rituals and ceremonies and all the other things that Nattie never wanted any part of. It was double-edged. Sugar kept each edge polished and thread sharp. The leather of the hilt had been dyed black. Attached to the hilt, at its very end, was a lump of silver. It was moon-shaped or fist-shaped or face-shaped. Nattie was never sure. The curls of wood continued to fall.

"Come on, before it's too late! You can't do this. Not without doing

something horrible to yourself. Come back before Sommerville sees you, please?"

Sugar looked up, past the front porch and into the second floor windows. "It's too late. He saw me a while ago. Probably trying to decide if I'll leave on my own. You'd better go home, Coz."

"Not without you."

"Then sit there in the shade and keep quiet. I think he's coming now." Sugar put her hand holding the dagger behind her back, looking calmly at the front door which Nattie, peeking around the side of the house, couldn't see.

The two women stayed in their places without moving as two minutes played along Nattie's nerves. The sound of the front door opening made Nattie fall to her knees. The footsteps sounded wet on the wooden planks of the porch. Then Nattie could see the back of a man dressed in khaki shorts and a red t-shirt leaning against a column. He was barefoot. Nattie would have looked him over more minutely, appraised him as completely as she did his wife, but her heart reminded her over and over that here was a man who beat women with small objects. And the fear played in her brain until all her thoughts were shredded beyond recognition. Their tattered shadows ran back and forth across her vision.

"Perhaps," the man without shoes said, "I should give you a picture of that car before you suffer from heat stroke." His voice was deep and smooth. His syllables were distinct and precise. He didn't have the rhythms of that other, older language beating through his tongue the way Nattie did, the way Sugar and Mama did, even the way Jess Dumar did. It was a piece of someplace dear and lost and Nattie hated him passionately for not having it.

"Charles Sommerville?"

His own name seemed to startle him. "Yes. And who are you?"

"A friend of your wife."

"Oh, well in that case I'll go fetch her." Charles Sommerville sounded cheerful. He was turning to go back in the house. Nattie almost saw his face.

"Not yet. First, I want you to tell me who I am. A game, if you like." Sugar's words were all blurred together, slurred and slightly sing-songy. It was the blurring of words that Nattie knew well. It can be heard at the height of a chant, when what was said was less important than the sound made in the saying.

Sommerville turned to face Sugar again. Nattie could see that he held his back straighter. "I'm not interested in games, young lady. Do you want to see my wife or don't you?"

"But this is such an easy game. Think. Besides, your wife is sleeping now, just as she sleeps every afternoon when she can have her bed to herself. She can't sleep at night, after you're through with her, when she has to lie beside you. She sleeps away every afternoon. Just as well anyway. She has no place to go, nothing to do, until four o'clock. Monday through Saturday. Look," Sugar opened her arms. "I am wearing your wife's clothes." Sugar

reached behind her back and withdrew her dagger. She resumed stripping the branch she still held. Charles Sommerville stepped back. "Tell me who I am."

For a moment, there was silence. "You're the Witch Paro's girl."

"Very good. But you need to know my name and that isn't good enough. I am Suzanne Paro." Sugar flipped the dagger suddenly in her hands. It glinted with the angry light of the sky. She flipped it into the air and caught it by the hilt. She flipped it again and caught it. She balanced the blade on her wrist and moved her arm, rotating it so that the dagger slid and spun around the wrist, controlled somehow by pressure applied to the hilt, casting light like sparks. It spun like the blade of a propeller.

Nattie knew the tricks. Nattie had known the carnival veteran who had taught them to Sugar nine years ago. The spinning was flashy but it didn't hold her. It was the silver lump opposite the blade that gripped her mind. It was the light dancing around it and transforming it into a fist, then a face, then a fist again. It changed back and forth with the beating of her heart, surrounded by a thousand yellow fires from the blade. Even when Sugar stopped the blade and held it still, pointing it at Charles Sommerville, the lump kept changing back and forth with a fluid motion that made Nattie feel nauseous.

"Come here," Sugar said. Nattie would have come up from her knees and gone forward to her cousin, her eyes fixed on the silver lump, had a man's back not intruded on her line of vision. Sommerville had come within two feet of Sugar. Nattie hadn't seen him move from the porch. Shaking uncontrollably, Nattie put her hands on the ground and smelled the earth through her fingertips. "Let me explain to you," she heard Sugar say, "the way things are." Nattie crawled forward and away from the shade of the house. She needed to hear this even if it wasn't intended for her ears. She needed to see the silver fist again. On her hands and knees, she needed to hear about the way things were.

"It doesn't matter now, but I will tell you anyway. I am Sugar, the one who stayed. I could have left, but I stayed. I thought that I would stay and then leave if I wanted. Maybe. And maybe I could stay and then leave and then come back again if I pleased. Then Jess came to me. She didn't leave, like me. And she didn't want to, even when anyone who could buy a bus ticket was leaving. She stayed in St. Andrew's. So I went on and stayed because staying felt good all the sudden and there was nothing outside that I thought I could want. Then you came. I didn't call on the Hidden One, when you started in on Jess. I was afraid that if I did She wouldn't let me leave when I wanted to. It's not that I wanted to leave, it's that I wanted to be able to leave, dance away like Nattie did, if ever I wanted. So Jess and I just kept hoping and I didn't call Her, even though She always wanted you, always wanted to take you through me since the beginning and to take me through killing you. I wouldn't let Her take you then, not when we didn't know it was hopeless.

"Then Nattie came back. We were all so sure, the whole parish so dead sure, that Nattie would leave and not come back. Others had not come

back. If the bayou couldn't swallow them, how could it get Nattie who was quick and could burn your eyes with the way she danced? I will tell you: none of those others knew the Hidden One like Nat, growing up in that house, so she had to come back. The Hidden One whispered and brought her back with a leash of Spanish moss. That's how I knew there was no place for me to go. How could I get away if Nat couldn't? So Jess has got to be here. She knows how to stay and staying won't be so bad if she is here. And I must stay. So if there is to be a leaving, and there must be because we can't live like this, you must do it. Jess and Nat can't do it. I can't do it. I'm sorry that you do not understand."

Nattie watched from her angle and saw her cousin reach behind her back. Sugar pulled out a roll of black cloth. She wrapped it around her witchblade. She spent some time at it since she only had the one hand to do it, the other still holding the branch, and the cloth was so soft and flowing it looked about as manageable as liquid. Once wrapped, Sugar shoved the roll into the front of her pants, hilt first, as if it were an old newspaper that she hadn't quite finished reading.

Sommerville did not move. He had not moved just as Nattie had not moved. As Sugar raised one end of the branch, stripped and white like a bone, to her chest and closed her eyes, Charles Sommerville moved. He grasped the opposite end of the branch and put it to his chest. He closed his eyes. Nattie threw herself prone on the ground, crying.

Mama went out on the porch to throw out the water in the bowl, then went back to sit beside her daughter on the sofa. On the coffee table lay a branch and several small curls of wood. Nattie had brought them back and would have burned them had Mama not said they would help her in her scrying. The witchblade stayed with Sugar.

"I went over the Sterling, too. Wiped off every place she could have touched."

"It doesn't matter. No one will look."

"A rich man dies . . ."

". . . Of a heart condition," Mama finished. "It happens all the time."

"That's really how he died?"

"That is really how he died. A defect in one of the blood vessels near the heart."

"Still, Sugar could get it for intentionally inducing a heart attack . . ."

"Will you listen to me, Nattie? It wasn't a heart attack. It was a heart defect, something he was born with that could have killed him years ago. The blood vessel just got huge for one reason or other and blocked the blood supply."

"How do you know that?"

"How do I know anything?"

"God I hate this! I've always hated this!" Nattie sat silently for a while as the fear and panic drained away, leaving her utterly miserable. "The blood vessel just got huge for one reason or other?"

"Yes."

"And Sugar is responsible?"

"Why do you go on saying things like that? It depends on how you look at it. If you believe in the Power, in your mother's and in your mother's mother's Craft, then Sugar was a channel for the will of the Hidden One. All that knife-play and wood-skinning was a ritual to get the energy flowing and Sommerville receptive to it. Of course, Sugar had to agree with that will. That is where she is responsible."

"And if you don't believe in the Hidden One?"

"Then Sugar scared him to death. But it couldn't have been intentional in the eyes of the law. After all, how could she know of a heart defect that won't turn up until the autopsy?"

"So she's covered," Nattie said, studying her mother's face. "But I'd have to believe in the Hidden One to understand how her eyes changed, wouldn't I?"

"You can't throw fire at someone with your bare hands and not get burnt yourself. If Judgement came to Sommerville through Sugar, there's every reason to think It tagged her on Its way."

"But that can't be all she gets. Not for killing a man. She has to pay some other price." Nattie had had to crawl over Sommerville's body and the hot grass to put a hand on her cousin's sneaker. Sugar lowered her face and opened her eyes. She didn't blink when Nattie gasped. It was as if the witch knew the color of the iris in each of her eyes. Brown, the color of the earth with a darkness like dried blood.

"Maybe we all get to pay something for letting that son of a bitch live among us."

Nattie wanted, suddenly and desperately, to believe in Jesus Christ. She wanted to believe in Judgement that came after life and not while she was in the process of living it. She wanted a carefully worked out system that wouldn't tire her with the possibilities of what lay behind, on, beyond, and within every breath she took. She wanted a horizon as wide as her fingernail and a universe as thick as a leaf. And a God who never whispered in the wind and promised freedoms she never wanted to think about. She wanted Sugar's soft, black eyes. She wanted to forget the way she trembled when the man died. How close had she been to the Other? The heat had made her dizzy. If I could, just once, surrender to the seduction of a sweet-faced Savior, Nattie thought, I would definitely be a happier woman. "Does she have to stay here, Mama, and live in St. Andrew's forever?"

"Is your birthplace so horrible, girl, that living here has got to be some kind of cosmic punishment?"

"Sugar said herself that she'd have to stay. That's probably why she's bawling in the other room."

"Maybe. Or maybe she's bawling because a man turned blue at her feet. Or maybe because her eyes changed. Or maybe because the Hidden One drove a fist through her soul and hammered another human being through her hands."

"You haven't got an answer. I think that's what I hate the most about

this. No answers."

"What you mean is that there aren't any answers you want to hear."

"What will you tell Sugar when she finally comes out of it? That she may as well get used to living on the bayou?"

"I might. Then again, I might not tell her anything."

Nattie picked up a curl of wood from the table and crushed it in her small hand, too overwhelmed with pity for her cousin to speak.

"Nattie," Mama leaned over and took her daughter's hand, wood and all, into her own. "Jess will be over soon and, if you can keep a civil tongue in your head, she'll bring Sugar around. That one has got a knack for making her feel good. As for getting used to the bayou, you're the one who has to get back into the swing of things. Sugar is the one who stayed."

